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Iran remains unbothered by US threats

• Judiciary orders no leniency against 'rioters' amid unrest • Trump vows Tehran will 'get hit very hard' if it kills more citizens • 12 dead as protests expand to 45 cities; intelligence officers seize weapons cache

PARIS: Iran refused on Monday to offer "rioters" leniency while defending citizens' right to demonstrate, a defiant stance taken after US President Donald Trump warned Tehran would "get hit very hard" if authorities killed more demonstrators amid deadly unrest.

Judiciary Chief Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei ordered officials to take a hard line against those causing instability as protests, which erupted over economic stagnation, expanded to include political demands.

"I instruct the attorney general and prosecutors across the country to act in accordance with the law and with resolve against the rioters and those who support them... and to show no leniency or indulgence," Mohseni Ejei said, according to the judiciary's *Mizan* news agency.

He added that Iran "listens to the protesters and their criticism, and distinguishes between them and rioters".

Demonstrations have taken place in 23 of Iran's 31 provinces, affecting at least 45 different cities to varying degrees.

The unrest has been concentrated in the west and consists mostly of small or medium-sized gatherings, according to an AFP tally based on official statements and media reports.

At least 12 people, including members of the security forces, have been killed in localised clashes since Dec 30, officials announced.

Since the protests began on Dec 28 — sparked when shopkeepers in the capital of Tehran staged a strike over high prices — officials have struck a conciliatory tone regarding economic demands while vowing to crush destabilisation.

Trump threats

Trump on Sunday told reporters aboard Air Force One that the US was watching the situation "very closely".

"If they start killing people like they have in the past, I think they're going to get hit very hard by the United States," Trump said.

Iran's economy has been hit hard by tough international sanctions.

The national currency, the rial, has lost more than a third of its value against the US dollar over the past year, and inflation is in the double digits.

To alleviate economic pressure, the government announced Sunday a monthly allowance for every citizen equivalent to roughly 3.5 per cent of the average monthly wage.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his country stood "in solidarity with the struggle of the Iranian people and with their aspirations for freedom."

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baqaei, speaking at a press conference, accused Israel of trying "to exploit the slightest opportunity to sow division and undermine our national unity."

Israel fought a 12-day war with Iran in June, which the US briefly joined with limited strikes on Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities.

Explosives seized

Police intelligence officers in Tehran have identified a suspected hideout used by "rioters," seizing "weapons, ammunition, and materials for making improvised explosive devices," according to Mizan.

The *Fars* news agency reported on Monday that "the trend observed on Sunday night shows a notable decrease in the number of gatherings and their geographic reach compared to previous nights."

While videos flooding social media are often impossible to verify, local media's accounting is not exhaustive, and state-run outlets have downplayed coverage of the demonstrations.

Most shops in Tehran were open Monday and residents went about their business. However, riot police were deployed at major intersections and officers were stationed outside some schools. Several universities have resumed classes, though only online.

The reformist newspaper Arman Melli said Monday that authorities had "heard the voices of the protesters," while the conservative papers Javan and Kayhan accused the United States and Israel of financially supporting rioters.

Protests have also taken place among the Iranian diaspora.

"With each new protest, Iranian men and women gain ground," Sahar Aghakhani, a 29-year-old French-Iranian translator, said at a demonstration in Paris on Sunday. "Movement by movement, we're getting closer to the end of the regime."Iran has experienced several outbreaks of nationwide protests in recent years, most notably in 2022 over the death in custody of Mahsa Amini for an alleged breach of the country's strict dress laws for women. The current protests have not yet reached the same scale.—AFP

A WOMAN shops at a store in Tehran as the unrest sweeping Iran over the collapse of the local currency's value eased, with life returning to normal in the capital's streets and markets.—Reuters

Greenland snubs Trump's 'annexation fantasies'

• As US president renews push for Arctic territory, PM Nielsen tells him 'that's enough now' • Danish premier also urges America to stop threatening its territory • Starmer says Greenland's future not for others to decide

COPENHAGEN/LONDON: President Donald Trump's call for Greenland to become part of the United States drew international condemnation on Monday, with the autonomous Danish territory's prime minister warning: "That's enough now."

Washington's military intervention in Venezuela has reignited fears about Greenland, the mineral-rich Arctic territory which Trump has repeatedly said he wants to annex.

"We need Greenland from the standpoint of national security, and Denmark is not going to be able to do it," he told reporters aboard Air Force One late on Sunday.

The island has untapped rare earth minerals and could be a vital player as the polar ice melts and new shipping routes emerge.

Greenland is also on the shortest route for missiles between Russia and the United States, and Washington already has a military base there.

"We'll worry about Greenland in about two months," continued Trump. "Let's talk about Greenland in 20 days."

Greenland Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen took to social media to tell the US leader: "That's enough now. No more pressure. No more insinuations. No more fantasies of annexation."

He added that they were open to dialogue. "We are open to discussions. But this must happen through the proper channels and with respect for international law."

'Stop threatening'

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen also urged the United States to stop threatening its autonomous territory over the weekend, and on Monday several European countries and the EU rushed to the support of Copenhagen.

Asked in a telephone interview with *The Atlantic* about the implications of the Venezuela military operation for Greenland, Trump said it was up to others to decide.

"They are going to have to view it themselves. I really don't know," Trump was quoted as saying, reiterating that the United States "needed" Greenland for its security.

Trump last month claimed Russian and Chinese ships were "all over" the territory's coast.

China's foreign ministry hit back on Monday, urging the United States to "stop using the so-called China threat as an excuse to seek personal gain".

The controversy drew a slew of supporting statements from around Europe, with EU foreign policy spokesperson Anitta Hipper telling reporters the bloc was committed to defending the territorial integrity of its members.

The latest flare-up came after a weekend of high tension sparked on Saturday by former Trump aide Katie Miller, who posted online an image of Greenland in the colours of the US flag with the caption "SOON".

Nielsen labelled the post "disrespectful" and Frederiksen on Sunday called on Washington to stop "threatening its historical ally".

She labelled "absurd" the idea of the United States taking over Greenland, pointing out that Denmark was a NATO member protected by the alliance's security guarantees.

Katie Miller is the wife of Trump adviser Stephen Miller, who is widely seen as the architect of many of Trump's policies, guiding the president's hard-line immigration policies and domestic agenda.

In response to Katie Miller's post, Denmark's ambassador to Washington, Jesper Moeller Soerensen, said his country was already working with Washington to boost security in the Arctic.

'Not for others to decide'

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said he stood with Denmark's premier.

"Well, I stand with her, and she's right about the future of Greenland," Starmer told reporters.

"Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark are to decide the future of Greenland — and only Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark," he said.

His sentiments were reflected in statements from the leaders of Finland, Sweden and Norway.

France's foreign ministry spokesman Pascal Confavreux told local TV that "borders cannot be changed by force" and added that his country felt "solidarity" with Denmark.—AFP

Syria, Israel resume US-mediated security talks

DUBAI: US-mediated talks between Syria and Israel have resumed after an interruption of several months, Syria's state news agency *SANA* reported on Monday, with Damascus seeking withdrawal of Israeli troops from territory seized after the fall of Bashar al-Assad.

SANA, citing a Syrian government source, said the Syrian delegation was led by Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani and intelligence chief Hussein al-Salama. The resumption of the talks reflects a push by Damascus to reclaim what it describes as its non-negotiable national rights, the source said.

The discussions are focused on reviving a 1974 disengagement agreement that established a UN-monitored buffer zone between Israel and Syria after the 1973 Middle East war, *SANA* said.

Israeli troops advanced deeper across the border after Assad was toppled on December 8, 2024 by rebel fighters who assumed Syria's leadership.

Israel has also intervened in what it calls missions to protect ethnic minority Druze in southwestern Syria.

Syria is seeking an Israeli withdrawal to positions held before Assad was toppled, and wants a reciprocal security framework guaranteeing its sovereignty and preventing interference in its internal affairs.

A Syrian official told *Reuters* last month that talks had been stalled since October, but that Syria expected a possible shift following a December 29 meeting between US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Syrian official said Damascus considered Israel's withdrawal from territory it took after Assad's fall to be a "red line" and that Syria had been asked to consider a phased withdrawal by Israeli troops.

Under previous rounds of US-mediated talks in Paris and Washington, Syria has pressed for a deal similar to the 1974 disengagement accord, which separated forces and maintained a ceasefire for decades, though formal peace was never achieved..—Reuters

Egypt backs Saudi Arabia on Yemen crisis

Sisi welcomes Riyadh's proposal to host 'inclusive conference' for southern groups

CAIRO: Egypt said on Monday it is aligned with Saudi Arabia on the conflicts in Yemen and Sudan, as well as the question of breakaway region Somaliland.

During talks in Cairo, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan stressed their countries' "identical" positions on "reaching peaceful solutions to the region's crises", an Egyptian presidency statement said.

They said solutions must "preserve the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of states," singling out Sudan, Yemen, Somalia and the Gaza Strip.

A recent internal conflict in Yemen involves the internationally recognised government and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC).

President Sisi on Monday welcomed Saudi Arabia's proposal to host an "inclusive conference" for southern Yemeni groups, while Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty called for de-escalation and a Yemeni-led political settlement.

On Sunday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told the Saudi crown prince in a phone call that his country was ready to help dialogue between Yemen's factions.

Erdogan told Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman during the phone call that Turkiye "is ready to contribute to efforts aimed at bringing parties together", according to his office.

The STC has welcomed a call for dialogue by Saudi Arabia to end the recent military escalation. The STC said in a statement on Saturday that the Saudi initiative was a "genuine opportunity for serious dialogue" that could safeguard "the aspirations of the southern people".

Tarek Saleh, a member of the Yemen Presidential Council, met Saudi Defence Minister Prince Khaled bin Salman and exchanged viewpoints on Yemen.

They discussed means to bolster joint efforts to support the stability of the country and the region's security.

Yemen's government on Sunday accused the separatists of cutting off the city of Aden and warned it would "take all necessary measures" after recapturing territory from them in the east on Saturday. —Agencies

UK toughens law to cut migrant boat crossings

• Police to confiscate phones and SIM cards from migrants • Charities condemn new legislation, call it 'anti-refugee' • Opposition party dismisses measures as 'cosmetic tweaks'

LONDON: UK authorities will from Monday deploy new counter-terror style powers to seize the phones of migrants who arrive by small boats from northern France, to tackle criminal gangs behind the crossings.

The initiative is part of Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer's attempts to slash the number of migrant arrivals, and stem a surge in support for Brexit figurehead Nigel Farage's anti-immigration party Reform UK.

Over 41,000 people made the perilous sea journey across the Channel last year — the second highest tally since records began in 2018.

Police and immigration enforcement officers will confiscate phones and SIM cards from migrants at the Manston processing centre, near Ramsgate, on the southeast coast of England.

The seizures will be allowed without the need to make an arrest under new legislation — the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill — passed by parliament last year.

Authorities hope the seizures will enable them to access information on phones such as contacts and maps to help disrupt the people smuggling networks and prosecute the ringleaders.

"We promised to restore order and control to our borders which means taking on the people smuggling networks behind this deadly trade," Border Security Minister Alex Norris said.

"That is exactly why we are implementing robust new laws with powerful offences to intercept, disrupt and dismantle these vile gangs faster than ever before and cut off their supply chains," he added.

Charities representing migrants have condemned the new measures.

"This new law is anti-refugee. It's another attack on rights, and further criminalises people seeking safety," said Refugee Action last month when the legislation received final approval.

The opposition Conservative Party's home affairs spokesperson Chris Philp dismissed the measures as "cosmetic tweaks".

He urged the government to get a "proper grip on the situation" by quitting the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The law has also created new criminal offences such as storing or supplying boat engines to bring migrants to the UK, punishable by up to 14 years in jail.

UK Interior Minister Shabana Mahmood in November announced a number of proposals to deter migrants, including making refugee status temporary and reviewing it every 30 months.

Migrants will also need to wait longer than the current five years before they can apply for permanent residency. Depending on their circumstances, it could take from 10 to 30 years.

Mahmood described the proposals, modelled on Denmark's strict asylum system, as "the most significant changes to our asylum system in modern times". —AFP

Israel defends ban on media access to Gaza

Court submission cites security risks in Palestinian territory

JERUSALEM: The Israeli government has told the Supreme Court that a ban on international media access to Gaza should remain in place due to security risks in the Palestinian territory, according to a court submission.

Since the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, triggered by an attack on Israel by the Palestinian group Hamas, Israeli authorities have barred foreign journalists from independently entering the devastated territory.

Instead, Israel has allowed only a limited number of reporters to enter Gaza on a case-by-case basis, embedded with its military forces inside the blockaded territory.

PALESTINIANS retrieve their belongings from a collapsed house that was damaged in an Israeli strike, in the central Gaza Strip.—Reuters

The Foreign Press Association (FPA), which represents hundreds of foreign journalists working in Israel and the Palestinian territories, filed a petition with the Supreme Court in 2024 seeking immediate and unrestricted access for international media to the Gaza Strip.

Since then, the court has given several extensions to the Israeli authorities to come up with a plan, but at a hearing last month it set January 4 as a final deadline.

Late on Sunday, the Israeli government filed its response with the court, a copy of which was obtained by *AFP*.

In the submission, the government said the ban on media access to Gaza should continue, citing security risks in the territory.

"Even at this time, entry of journalists into the Gaza Strip without escort, as requested in the petition, should not be permitted," said the government submission. "This is for security reasons, based on the position of the defence establishment, which maintains that a security risk associated with such entry still exists."

The government said the ceasefire in Gaza, which came into effect on October 10, continues to face regular threats.

At least 420 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza by Israeli forces since the ceasefire took effect, according to Gaza's health ministry. The Israeli military said three of its soldiers have also been killed during the same period.

Last month, Defence Minister Israel Katz told parliament that the military's swift responses to alleged ceasefire violations by Hamas could endanger journalists, according to Israeli media reports.

The government said in its submission that the search for the remains of the last prisoner held in Gaza is ongoing, suggesting that allowing journalists into the Palestinian territory at this stage could hinder the operation.

The remains of Ran Gvili, whose body was taken to Gaza after he was killed during the Hamas attack on Oct 7, 2023, have still not been recovered despite the ceasefire.

All of the other 250 prisoners seized on that day — both the living and the deceased — have been returned to Israel.

The Supreme Court is expected to issue a ruling on the matter, though it is unclear when a decision will be handed down.—AFP

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